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ABSTRACT

The existential theory of radical mid-life career change is a theory focusing on work salient individuals around the age of 35 and beyond who have previously established a career path and who are in a position to alter that path due to minimal environmental constraints. The theory postulates that at around this age the realization of the finite quality of one's life begins to intrude into consciousness. As a response to this intrusion, each individual implicitly or explicitly chooses to deny the existence of these thoughts and their implications or to engage in a process of coming to terms with personal mortality and its significance to the remaining years of life. Choosing an acceptance strategy results in a fundamental change in one's self-concept which leads to a life evaluation process. Subsequent to the life evaluation process is an occupational evaluation process which leads to a judgment of its congruence or incongruence with the reformulated self-concept. If one concludes that the present occupation is congruent with the reformulated self-concept, stability of the established career path is predicted. Conversely, a conclusion of incongruence of the present occupation with the amended self-definition produces an internal motivation towards congruence resulting in a radical career change. The implications of this theory for assisting voluntary mid-life career clients seem appropriate within the context of extant empirical evidence. (ABL)

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Self-Concept, Existential Reality and Radical Voluntary Mid-Life Career Change: A Theoretical Model

While mid-life career change is not a new phenomenon, the last 20 years have witnessed an upsurge in interest in the behavior (Brown, 1985; Neapolitan, 1980). Brown (1985) suggests that to a large extent, this increased focus is related to the aging of the American society and the growing proportion of that population seeking career counseling. He further states that, despite the influx of individuals in their mid-thirties and above searching for new occupations, "...there are few definitive hypotheses about the causes of mid-life career change and even fewer models about the most effective means of providing assistance for mid-life career change." (pp. 370).

The purpose of the present article is to develop a theory of mid-life career change which integrates Super's (1963) Career Development Self Concept Theory with the concept of existential reality. Specifically, the focus of the theory is on what has been described by Neapolitan (1980) as a radical and voluntary career change. Thus, radical voluntary mid-life career change will be conceptualized in terms of a vocationally directed response to the inclusion in the self-concept of an existentially modified self perception.

A major obstacle to theoretical advancement in the area of mid-life career change has been the plethora of definitions applied to the relevant concepts (Brown, 1985). For the purpose of this presentation, an extension of Brown's (1985) conceptualization of mid-life career change will be employed. He defines mid-life career change as "...a process in which an adult, usually between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five, enters a new occupation that may require mild, moderate, or extreme adjustments in training or experience." (pp. 371-372). A voluntary change is viewed as one that is self initiated and not based upon financial considerations (Neapolitan, 1980). Again as defined by Brown (1985), a radical change is viewed as one in which the prior occupational training and experience demands are unrelated to the demands of the new occupation. In short, radical voluntary mid-life career change is conceptualized as an internally motivated fundamental departure from an established career pattern that may occur around the age of thirty-five or beyond.

Overview of Super's Theory

The underlying premise of Super's vocational development theory states that:

> In expressing vocational preference (Super, 1951), a person puts into occupational terminology his idea of the kind of person he is; that in entering an

> occupation, he seeks to implement a concept of himself; that in getting established in an occupation he achieves self actualization. (Super, 1963; pp. 1).

He defines self-concept as a collection of observed inter-related facts about one's self which have personal meaning. In sum, "A self concept is the individual's picture of himself, the perceived self with accrued meanings." (Super, 1963; pp. 18). Thus, the process of career development involves a continually developing view of one's self, based upon the inclusion of meaningful and relevant life experiences and percepts into the self-concept, and the expression of this self-view through occupational outlets.

Within this general framework, three of Super's twelve propositions are most relevant to the present formulation. These are:

1) The process of career development is one of developing and implementing self-concepts,
2) Self-concepts change over time based upon person environment interactions and,
3) Career choice is affected by a host of non-psychological factors such as economic constraints and opportunity (Super, 1985).

In summation, viewing mid-life career change from this theoretical framework suggests that, modifications in one's self definition during mid-life, as at other times, may result in career adjustments motivated by one's drive to occupationally express an amended self-concept. Furthermore, these adjustments may be facilitated or inhibited by a myriad of external conditions. It is the premise of this article that a radical voluntary mid-life career change is a function of a fundamental change in one's self-concept influenced by the emergence and acceptance of an awareness of existential reality and facilitated by favorable environmental life conditions.

Existential Reality

Barnes (1968) defines existentialism as "...the consciousness of a man that he is existing in terms of his own flow of experience, a flow which he can know, feel, and sense only within himself." (pp. 9). May (1983) suggests that by coming to terms with one's existence, one must face the important problem of nonbeing or nothingness. This acceptance of the reality of existence is conceptualized by Boss (1979) as a "being-unto-death" (pp. 119) which is most commonly manifested by the individual's denial of personal mortality. However, there is an alternate way of dealing with existential reality. As described by Boss:

> The most dignified human relationship to death consists in keeping the knowledge of personal mortality constantly in awareness, neither fleeing

> from it nor hiding it. On the contrary, in accepting mortality as his most characteristic, final, isolated, and -except for the actual moment of death- certain existential possibility, man first realizes his responsibility for every instant of his existence. If what he does is not in tune with the moment, that moment is irrevocably lost to him; his conscience will remind him that he has fallen behind in fulfilling his existence. (pp. 121)

The end result of one becoming aware of the basic reality of existence is that one's past is evaluated in terms of "...the waste of limited years, the unassayed tasks, the locked opportunities, the talents withering in disuse..." (Feifel, 1969; pp. 70). And one's future takes on a sense of urgency calling one to "...rework the narrow identity by which we defined ourselves in the first half of life (Sheehy, 1976; pp. 30). Sheehy (1976) suggests that these thoughts regarding one's mortality begin to manifest themselves between the ages of 35 and 45 and are a product of the realization in terms of productive years that there are more years in the past than will be available in the future.

In conclusion, it is hypothesized that at around the age of 35 and beyond, the realization of the finite quality of one's life begins to intrude into consciousness. As a response to this intrusion, each individual has a choice: either to deny the existence of these thoughts and their implications or to engage in a process of coming to terms with their own mortality and its significance to one's remaining years of life.

Although the preceding background information regarding existential reality suggests a pejorative view of individuals who would choose a denial strategy, the present theoretical formulation refrains from making such judgments. Rather than suggesting the superiority of one strategy over the other, the theory intimates that both strategies represent equally acceptable responses to the process of coming to terms with existential reality.

Theoretical Formulation

The focus of the following theory is on individuals who are at mid-life as defined by being around the age of 35 or beyond. Specifically, the emphasis is on the subset of these individuals who are in a position to make voluntary career changes as opposed to those who may make career changes necessitated by environmental conditions such as financial considerations and for whom work represents a salient life role. That is, for the population focused upon by the present theory, the occupational implementation of the self-concept is a primary concern. Two primary assumptions underlay the existential self-concept theory

of radical voluntary mid-life career change. These assumptions are:

1) there is a previously established career path which can be identified upon retrospective analysis and,
2) around the age of 35 or beyond the realization that life is a finite resource begins to affect one's self concept.

The flow chart in Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the theoretical model and is explained below in a step-wise fashion.

Step 1: Mid-Life/Fxistential Reality. Entry into the model is at the point in time at which the theoretical assumptions are met and is represented in Figure 1 as the interface between mid-life and existential reality. At this point in the formulation, the individual has developed a career path which can be identified retrospectively and has been confronted with thoughts regarding personal mortality. Although not specifically addressed in the model, these thoughts may be initiated either internally or externally and begin to affect one's self-definition. In response to this occurrence, one consciously or unconsciously chooses to engage in a strategy of denying the fact of personal mortality or begins a process of accepting the realities of existence.

Step 2a: Denial Strategy. As Boss (1979) has suggested, the denial strategy is the tactic most commonly employed in dealing with existential reality. In addition, it is reported that the most common type of career change encountered at mid-life is one in which the skills and experiences in the first occupation carry over into the new occupation (Hiestand, 1971). Integrating Boss's view and Hiestand's empirically based conclusion with Super's career development self-concept theory, the present theory suggests that for those individuals who choose a denial strategy, the impact of this process on the self-concept is minimal. Since the individual either implicitly or explicitly chooses not to acknowledge existential reality and its implications, there is no impetus for the life evaluation processes as posited by Feifel (1969) and Sheehy (1976).

Step 3a: Remain in Career Path. The theory predicts that, for these individuals, subsequent career changes, if they do occur, will be changes in level of occupation within the same field or movement into closely related fields since the denial strategy would result in little or no reformulation of the individual's self-concept. Thus, these individuals would remain in their established general career paths with

possible adjustments to the path, but no radical career changes. As depicted by the broken line, it is possible for one who opts to follow this strategy, to reconsider the choice at a later time and to subsequently choose the acceptance strategy. From there, one would proceed through the same steps as those individuals originally adopting the acceptance strategy.

Step 2b: Acceptance Strategy. The alternate strategy of dealing with existential reality as described by Boss (1979) is one of accepting the fact of personal mortality and its implications.

Step 3b: Reformulated Self-Concept. It is posited that this acceptance is a process, engagement in which will result in a reformulation of the self-concept through the inclusion in the self definition of the concept of personal nonbeing or personal "finiteness".

Step 4b: Life Evaluation. This re-definition of the self will lead to the life evaluation process as posited by Feifel (1969) and Sheehy (1976). Through this process, the individual's past will be judged using the reformulated self-concept as the standard and the future goals and plans will be assessed for their congruence with the amended self-concept.

Step 5b: Occupational Evaluation. Subsequent to the life evaluation process, one engages in an occupational evaluation process. The present occupation as well as its future possibilities are evaluated once again using the modified self-concept as the gauge. Through this evaluation, a conclusion regarding the appropriateness of one's present career course as an occupational expression of the amended self-concept is drawn. The resulting decision is either that the present occupation is congruent or incongruent with the reformulated self-definition.

Step 6a: Congruent with Reformulated Self-Concept. If, based upon the occupational evaluation process, one concludes that the present occupation is an accurate expression of the reformulated self-view the conclusion is drawn that the present occupation is congruent with the reformulated self-concept.

Step 7a: Remain in Career Path. At this juncture, the theory would again predict that, for these individuals, subsequent career changes, if they occur, will be changes in level of occupation within the same field or movement into closely related fields. Thus, these individuals will remain in their established general career paths with possible career adjustments, but no radical career changes.

Step 6b: Incongruent with Reformulated Self-Concept. The alternate conclusion from the occupational evaluation is

that the present occupation is incongruent with the reformulated self-concept. This incongruence will result in internal motivation for change to a congruent occupation.

Step 7b: Radical Career Change. The behavioral result of this conclusion is radical career change. At this point one will seek out an occupation through which the reformulated self-concept can be implemented.

Counseling Implications

The focus of the following implications will be on individuals who employ an acceptance strategy for dealing with existential reality. For these individuals, the theory suggests that movement through the process as outlined in Figure 1 may proceed without the need for professional assistance. However, it is equally possible that one may seek help in dealing with the issues associated with any or all of the delineated stages.

Additionally, it is postulated that the type of help sought may be a function of the step that an individual is at in the process. For instance, difficulties at earlier steps may result in one seeking personal counseling, whereas, distress at later steps may result in the procurement of vocational assistance. A brief outline of some possible step related difficulties that may be encountered in a counseling environment as well as some potential interventions or counseling goals is presented below.

At the Mid-Life/Existential Reality step, an individual may experience undifferentiated or global anxiety and would most likely seek personal counseling. The presence of this anxiety may represent the intrusion into consciousness of thoughts regarding one's mortality. The goal of counseling will be to define the source of anxiety and attempt to normalize the associated feelings.

A useful tool in this vein is Super's Career-Life Rainbow (Super, 1980). In addition to using the technique as described by Super, a modification of the Career Life Rainbow will allow the individual to project his or her perceived position along a continuum of existence. This modification involves deleting the ages and life stages portion of the rainbow and replacing them with a birth anchor to the left and a death anchor to the right as seen in Figure 2. The modification removes the age/stage related cues to the person's place along the life-span. Thus, the first step in this procedure is to have the client indicate his or her position along a time-line. This procedure allows for discussion of the implications of a specific time-line placement to the individual. It is suggested that placement closer to the death anchor indicates the possible presence of thoughts regarding existential anxiety while placement closer to the center or to the birth anchor indicates their absence. The processing of this placement within the counseling environment will lead to the

normalization of the anxiety and thereby facilitate the acceptance process.

Difficulties in the Reformulated Self-Concept and Life Evaluation steps may be in self-exploration/self-acceptance issues and the integration of the concept of personal mortality into the self-definition. The counseling goals in response to these difficulties will be to facilitate each of the processes. The Career Rainbow, used in conjunction with an accepting and non-judgmental counseling style, may be the appropriate technique to be employed within this framework. Again, the type of counseling sought for these issues will most likely be personal rather than vocational.

Counseling sought at the Occupational Evaluation step will be primarily vocational counseling. Individuals experiencing problems at this point will be those who have decided that their present occupation is incongruent with their reformulated self-concept and who are searching for a more congruent occupational outlet. In addition, these individuals will have previously resolved the issues related to the prior steps. Counseling goals at this juncture will be those specific to vocational counseling. That is, occupational exploration, values clarification, interest and ability assessment, and decision making. However, it should be noted that the occupational implementation of values may be of primary concern for these individuals.

Testing the Theory

The primary complication to tests of the present theory is in the assessment of the interface with existential reality. Since this is a phenomenological event, its occurrence can neither be accurately predicted or quantified. In addition, as the theory suggests, both the denial and acceptance strategies for dealing with the notion of personal mortality may result in the same occupational response, i.e. remaining in the established career path. Thus, the only noticeable occupational response to the interface between mid-life and existential reality is postulated as the relatively rare event of radical career change (Hiestand, 1971). In short, the validity of the second theoretical assumption, that of the impinging of the reality of personal mortality upon one's consciousness at mid-life, can only be inferred from ancillary evidence.

Despite this limitation, testing of the theory might be accomplished retrospectively through extensive interviewing of individuals identified as radical voluntary mid-life career changers. These interviews would focus on the individual's perceptions of the antecedents leading to the career change and thus may offer support for the present theoretical formulation.

Difficulties with this methodology, however, lie in the fact that retrospective analyses are notoriously biased due to the

phenomenological perspective. As such, any evidence garnered for the theory through this method would be anecdotal at best.

An alternative approach would be longitudinal in nature. Employing this approach one could assess individuals in their mid-twenties using a battery of measures including a values measure and the Career Life Rainbow modification. These same individuals could then be reassessed at 35, 45, and 55 using the same measures. The occupations of the subjects could be evaluated at each time of measurement and career alterations could be investigated to determine if they represented radical voluntary career changes as defined by the theory.

Analyses would be aimed at determining whether changes in any of the measures over time could differentiate the radical career changers from those individuals who remain relatively stable in their career paths. The theory would suggest that, for radical career changers, the value measure and time-line placements might change from the first assessment to the assessment following the career change (changes in the time-line placements would have to be out of proportion to the actual intervening time period to be considered significant). These results, if they occurred, could be interpreted as indicating a reformulated self-concept and suggest that subsequent life and occupational evaluations had motivated a realignment of the amended self definition with an occupational outlet. Furthermore, the time-line placement analysis might be interpreted to indicate that the reformulation of the self-concept was a function of the acceptance of an existential perspective on one's life.

One difficulty with this line of reasoning is that perhaps one's self-concept can change as a result of an acceptance strategy without affecting one's values. In addition, for those individuals who do not engage in a radical career change, the prediction of their values scores over time are equally problematic. Also, while an analysis of the time-line placement might indicate the inclusion in the self-concept of an existential perspective on one's life, inferring a causal connection between that event and a radical career change would be difficult.

Clearly, what is needed to effectively test the present theory is an assessment device specifically aimed at measuring the core constructs of the formulation. These core constructs are existential reality and an existential self-concept component. Included in these measurements must be an assessment of ego preoccupation, emotional commitment, and cognitive elaboration (Abelson, 1988) in order draw accurate inferences and to make reasonable predictions of behavioral outcomes. One possible method of assessment of these constructs may be through the development of an existentially based world view measure.

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Conclusion

The existential theory of radical mid-life career change is a theory focusing on work salient individuals around the age of 35 and beyond who have previously established a career path and who are in a position to alter that path do to minimal environmental constraints. The theory postulates that at around this age, the realization of the finite quality of one's life begins to intrude into consciousness.

As a response to this intrusion, each individual implicitly or explicitly chooses to deny the existence of these thoughts and their implications or to engage in a process of coming to terms with personal mortality and its significance to the remaining years of life. Choosing an acceptance strategy results in a fundamental change in one's self-concept which leads to a life evaluation process.

Subsequent to the life evaluation process is an occupational evaluation process which leads to a judgment of its congruence or incongruence with the reformulated self-concept. If one concludes that the present occupation is congruent with the reformulated self-concept, stability of the established career path is predicted. Conversely, a conclusion of incongruence of the present occupation with the amended self-definition produces an internal motivation towards congruence resulting in a radical career change.

While the theory appears difficult to test at the present time, its implications for assisting voluntary mid-life career clients seem appropriate within the context of extant empirical evidence regarding the occupational behavior of that population. Further efforts directed at the development of an assessment device for testing the relevant theoretical constructs are indicated.

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Figure 1. Mid-life responses to existential reality and their occupational outcomes.

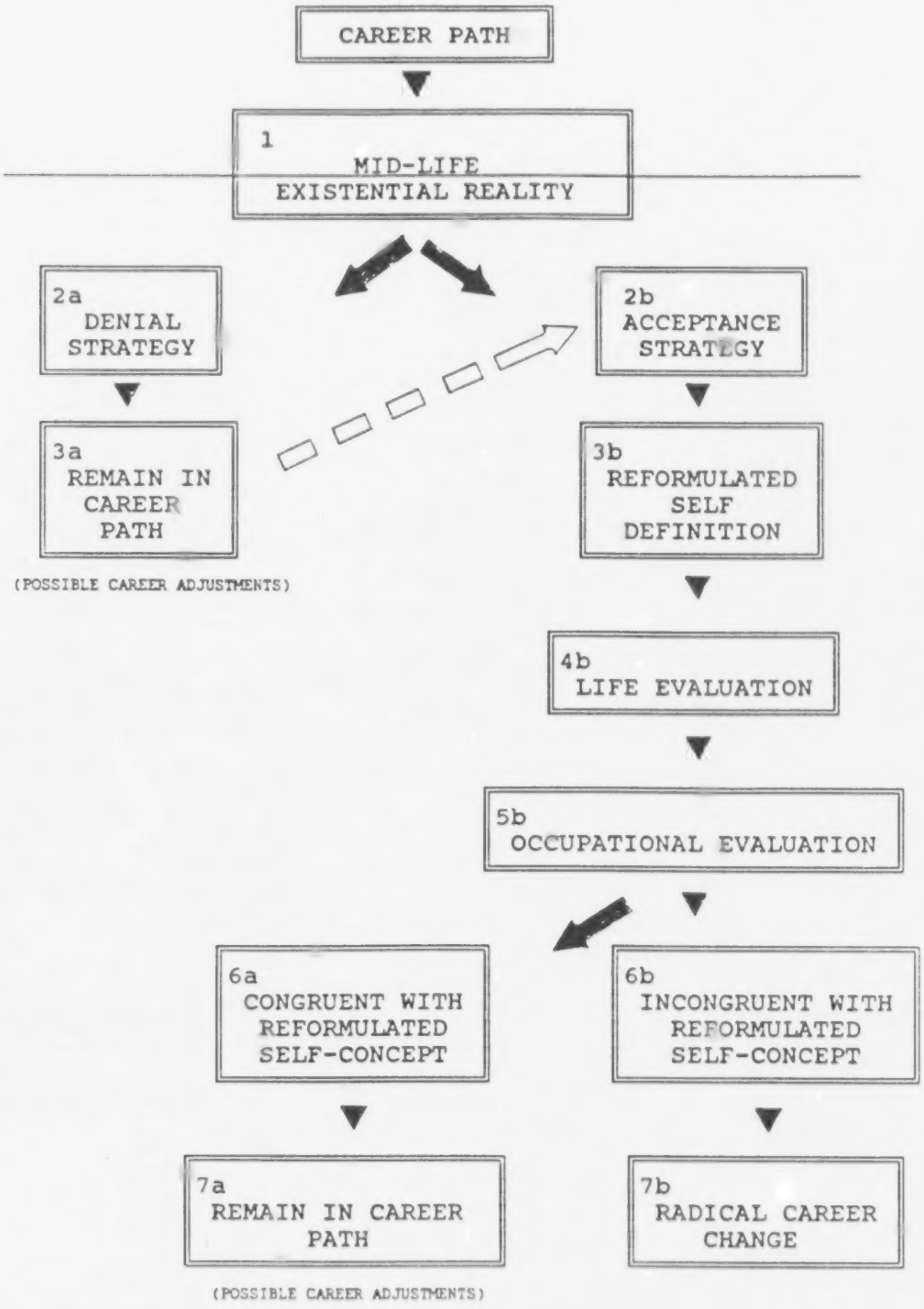

Figure 2. Career-Life Rainbow Modification Outline.